2008 Iowa WIC Food Security Survey Executive Summary

Introduction. For most Iowans the worry about finding their next meal or feeding their family generally never crosses their mind, but for a certain population this is a constant struggle and concern. On average from 2005-2007 there were 1,227,000 households in Iowa. Of these, 11.7% lived with some form of food insecurity. This represents approximately 143,559 households in Iowa¹.

Food security is defined as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.2" Individuals or households are considered food secure if they have high or marginal food security. High food security results in no reported indications of food access problems or limitations. Marginal food security is defined as one or two reported indications which are typically anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house and there is little or no indication of changes in diet or food intake². Food insecurity is defined by two categories, low food security or very low food security. Prior to 2006, low food security was labeled as food insecurity without hunger and very low food security was food insecurity with hunger. Low food security results in reports of reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet. There is little or no indication of reduced intake for this category. Very low food security is then defined as reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake².

The Iowa Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, also known as WIC, is a supplemental nutrition program. WIC is designed to assist low income, nutritionally at risk infants, children under the age of 5, pregnant women, breastfeeding women, and postpartum women up to 6 months after birth by providing healthy foods, nutrition education and referrals to other health care agencies. In Iowa, WIC provides services to over 75,000 participants each month.

The Iowa WIC Program has completed food security surveys with the WIC participants in 1997, 2000, and 2003. Different processes have been used to complete this survey including providing a survey at their appointment and mailing surveys to their homes. In 2003 a random sample of surveys were mailed to the participant's home. In 2003, "43 percent of survey respondents were food insecure, 26.3 percent were insecure without hunger and 17.4 percent of the respondents were food insecure with hunger.3"

Extent of Food Insecurity Among Iowa WIC Participants

Methodology. In 2008, the Iowa WIC Program assessed the food security status of WIC participants using a very similar survey to the one used in 2003. All questions had been validated by the U.S. Household Food Security Survey with one minor adjustment requested by the USDA Economic Research Service. This adjustment allowed them to test the separation of one question into two. In 2008 we separated out the question, "In the last 12 months, did you or other members in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?" The separation resulted in one question addressing just skipping meals and the other question addressing just cutting meals.

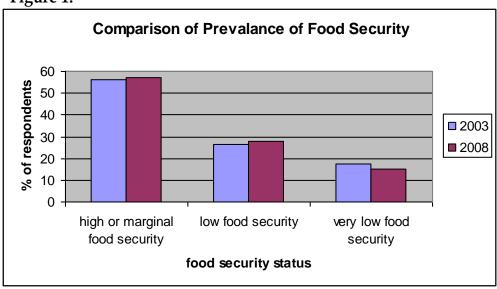
Surveys were distributed to local agencies representing 5% of their service population. This resulted in a total of 3,603 surveys provided for distribution. The agencies were instructed on how many surveys should be distributed at each of their clinic locations. The surveys were then randomly offered to participants as they arrived to clinic for their appointment. Participating in the survey was completely voluntary for participants. Each agency distributed surveys until they were gone. All surveys were provided in both English and Spanish. Each agency then returned the completed surveys that were sealed in envelopes by the participants to the state WIC office marked with their agency number.

Analysis. Results were tabulated using a data entry service through the Bureau of Information Management at the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH). IDPH Center for Health Statistics used the same process as 2003 to complete analysis using SPSS. Also as in 2003, Mark Nord with the USDA Economic Research Service used Rasch Scaling to determine item discrimination and severity scores between the food security survey completed now and those completed in 2003. By using this process we were able to compare the 2003 results with our 2008 results and with the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS).

Demographics. 3,543 surveys were returned to the state WIC office resulting in a 98% return rate. Four of the 20 WIC agencies had fewer than 100 surveys returned. Females were the primary respondents of this survey at 96%. Employment status items indicated that in 17% of households no member was employed, one person was employed in 55.4% and two people were employed in 22.8% of households. When reporting income, almost 31% reported an income of less than \$10,000 and almost 68% reported a household income of less than \$25,000. Almost 55% of survey respondents reported having a high school education or less while almost 43% had a technical or college level education. Respondents specified their race or ethnicity, almost 71% were white, almost 16% were Hispanic/Latino, and almost 7% were Black/African America.

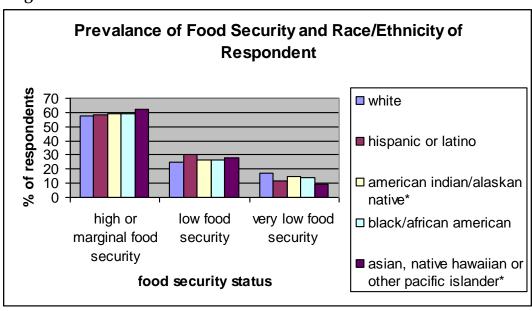
Household Food Security. The measurement of food security was determined by the number of affirmative responses to the seven food security questions asked. Low food security was determined if there was an affirmative response to two, three, or four of the questions. Very low food security resulted in an affirmative response to five or more of the questions. In 2003, 43% of respondents were determined to be food insecure and this number remained at 43% in 2008. Trends for severity of food insecurity remained similar with almost 28% defined as having low food security and just over 15% with very low food security (Figure 1).

Figure 1.



The food security status of white, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American respondents was compared and 41-42% of respondents in all groups were found to be food insecure. Almost 25% of white respondents reported low food security and 17% had very low food security. Over 30% of Hispanic or Latino respondents had low food security and with 12% having very low food security. Low food security was present for 27% of Black or African American respondents with 14% having very low food security. Almost 42% of American Indian or Alaskan Natives and 38% of Asian respondents were food insecure; both of these groups had less than 100 respondents. (Figure 2).

Figure 2.



Extent of Food Insecurity Among Iowa WIC Participants

The extent of food insecurity in the Iowa WIC population from 2003 to 2008 has remained basically unchanged. When comparing the statewide data to the CPS-FSS data, food insecurity status in Iowa's WIC populations is comparable to national levels.

Participation in Food Assistance Programs. Participation in food assistance programs other than WIC by respondents changed from 2003 to 2008. In 2003, 39% of respondents did not participant in any other food assistance programs while in 2008 this number decreased to less than 14%. Participation in the food stamp program increased to almost 50% in 2008 from 32.4% in 2003. School lunch program participation decreased slightly from 29.8% in 2003 to almost 26% in 2008. Participation in the use of a food bank or food pantry did increase slightly from 6% to almost 8% of respondents utilizing this service.

Conclusion. Food security is a basic need for all individuals but not always easily obtained. This survey was completed with Iowa WIC participants at the end of a month of record flooding in Iowa and at the beginning of economic downturn for this nation. Having enough food is a multifaceted situation involving more than just income and access.

The 2008 Iowa WIC survey showed many similar results to the 2003 survey. These results indentify that even with the majority of WIC families receiving another source of food assistance outside of WIC, the struggle to find enough food is difficult. The status of food insecurity is Iowa is also similar to national trends which continue to show a need for continued efforts in solving food security issues.

Future Actions. The Iowa WIC Program continues to work with participants to openly discuss food access and provide regular referrals to other food assistance programs when needed. The end of calendar year 2008 and the start of 2009 have been very difficult times for the majority of Iowans and this is reflected in the Iowa WIC Program participation rates. In 2003 when the last food security survey was completed, the Iowa WIC Program served approximately 67,000 people each month. AS of early 2009 over 75,000 people are being served and these numbers continue to grow monthly. Collaborative efforts between local WIC agencies and other community level programs are more important now than ever before. Access to safe and nutritious foods must continue to be addressed in order to preserve the health and livelihood of Iowa families.

References

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- 2. Food Security in the United States: Definitions of Humber and Food Security. U.S. Dept of Agriculture, Econ Res. Serv. November 2008. Available at: http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodSecurity/Labels.htm
- 3. Iowa Department of Public Health. *Extent of Food Insecurity Among Iowa WIC Participants*. Des Moines, Iowa WIC Program, August 2004.



Extent of Food Insecurity Among Iowa WIC Participants

2008 Iowa WIC Survey Indicator Set for Classifying Household by Food Security-Status Level

1. "The food that we bought just didn't last, and we didn't have money to get more." Was that often, sometimes, or
never true for your household in the last 12 months? (1) Often true
(1) Orien true (2) Sometimes true
(3) Never true
(4) I don't know
2. "We couldn't afford to eat balanced meals." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for your household in the last 12 months?
(1) Often true
(2) Sometimes true
(3) Never true
(4) I don't know
3. In the last 12 months, did you or other members in your household ever cut the size of your meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
(1) Yes
(2) No
(3) I don't know
4. In the last 12 months, did you or other members in your household ever skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
(1) Yes
(2) No
(3) I don't know
5. In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food? (1) Yes
(2) No
(3) I don't know
6. In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?
(1) Yes
(2) No
(3) I don't know

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